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From 'native rags' to riches? Sartorial aspiration in *The Nether World*

'In the social classification of the nether world,' George Gissing's narrator observes in an early chapter of *The Nether World* (1889), 'it will be convenient to distinguish broadly, and with reference to males alone, the two great sections of those who do, and those who do not, wear collars'.¹ While a social 'analyst' could 'discriminate' 'subtle gradation[s]' between these two 'orders', dress nonetheless visibly and rigidly codifies male identity (69). The same is not true of the novel's female characters, who wear and adjust their dress, not always successfully or permanently, to articulate personal aspiration and social mobility.

When we first meet the 'cold, subtle, original' Clara Hewett, she is simply, inadequately and yet becomingly dressed without 'any pretended elegance' in modest but well-made clothes that accentuate her gracefulness yet also reveal her vulnerability by offering 'poor protection against the rigours of a London winter' (26). Clara is about to enter into employment at the Imperial Restaurant and Luncheon Bar, where she 'contemptuously' changes her 'simple, but not badly made' day dress for 'cheap', 'vulgar' 'evening attire' while dreaming of 'genuine luxuries' rather than such 'shams' (78–79, 26). This combination of public display and private ambition leads Clara to abandon her 'slavery' for the life of a provincial actress, an existence that confirms her ability to dress performatively but also signifies social disgrace and concludes in disaster when her face is ruined in a vitriol attack (88). Ironically, while Clara's social aspiration has been articulated through her sartorial choices, she now finds her career options curtailed by her practical inaptitude as a needlewoman, and a final, desperate 'piece of acting' is designed to win her a husband (287). Arranging her abundant hair 'as she had learned to do it for the stage' and using her 'well-fitting' and 'sober' dress to display 'her admirable figure', Clara conceals her 'veiled face' and pre-meditated marital scheme 'in shadow' to secure a miserable but sheltered existence in shabby Crouch End (282–83, 285). The end of the novel pits her 'grace and natural dignity' against her dishevelled hair, suggesting mental anguish at missed opportunities (375).

If Clara's sartorial aspirations come to nothing, Pennyloaf Candy never contemplates an escape from the nether world she regards 'with the indifference of habit' (74). The daughter of an alcoholic mother and a violent father, the 'meagre, hollow-eyed, bloodless' Pennyloaf nonetheless possesses a 'certain charm – that dolorous kind of prettiness which is often enough seen in the London needle-slave' (72). Her appearance signals an effort to keep her 'miserable' attire 'in order': 'the boots upon her feet were sewn and patched into shapelessness; her limp straw hat had just received a new binding' (72). Later decked out in gaudy splendour as Bob Hewett's bride, Pennyloaf grotesquely revels in the trinkets that Clara spurns, 'sh[i]n[ing]' in a 'blue, lustrous' outfit 'hung about with bows and streamers', with 'the reddest feather purchasable in the City Road' gracing her 'broad-brimmed hat of yellow straw', and a 'gleaming' 'real gold' ring on her 'scrubby' finger (105). This 'most unwonted apparel' is of course later 'rent [...] off her back' by jealous Clem Peckover in a

¹ George Gissing, *The Nether World*, edited by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 69. Further references to this edition are given in brackets.

brutal fight on Clerkenwell Green, and the bloodied and ‘filth-smeared’ newly-weds ‘grop[e] [their] way blindly to the black hole’ of Shooter’s Gardens to commence their equally ragged domestic life by ‘pawn[ing] the wedding-ring’ (105, 112–13). Unlike Clara whose sartorial skills are limited to consuming fashion, Pennyloaf, however, eventually achieves a precarious independence as a seamstress, helping another young widow run a ‘poor little shop’ ‘heaped with the most miscellaneous’ ‘second-hand-clothing, women’s and children’s’ (387). Although Pennyloaf confesses to feeling ‘a bit low’, she is nonetheless gainfully employed in transforming ‘native rags’ into usable goods, safe from domestic abuse, and part of a supportive female network – a fate as close to a happy ending as Gissing is able to muster in this bleak novel (387, 116). While, then, both Clara and Pennyloaf articulate social aspiration and status through dress in the course of the novel, the ability to produce proves in the end more conducive to modest happiness than the desire to consume.

Bibliography

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